

I'm struck by how out of touch John Charles is with Oregonians, as well as the rest of the country.

On last Sunday's commentary cover ("Ditching the doctrine," December 8, 2002), Charles seems to think we should merely continue the land-use habits of the pioneers, who developed land as they wished, without thinking about environmental consequences. Although rightly honored for their hard work and endurance, those who settled the West gave little thought to their impact on future generations.

More often than not, they took what they wanted—trees, gold, water, fish, furs—then simply moved on. Today, we know this approach isn't sustainable, especially when exploding population, increased development, and destructive industries are consuming our land and resources at an alarming rate. During the 1990s, Americans lost an area the size of West Virginia to development.

According to Charles and his libertarian colleagues, we should simply use pricing to regulate whatever environmental protection we need. But aren't certain environmental, societal and human safety issues beyond a monetary value?

Some corporations don't seem to think so. They simply factor the risk of human injury and death into their cost-benefit analysis and price their products accordingly. Should we allow people to pollute, destroy or even kill if they're willing to pay enough for the privilege?

And his argument that we don't have to worry about how we use land because we have lots of it is fallacious. We have precious little land where most people want, or need, to live—and we're developing that land at a furious pace.

Prime agricultural land, especially at the urban fringe, is disappearing at an alarming rate. Much of the agriculture in Fresno County, Calif.—which produces more food than 24 other states combined—is likely to be lost to sprawling development within the next 20 years.

Even in areas that aren't productive farm or forest land, the notion that people can just live wherever they want with no thought to land-use planning has created some of the nation's worst cases of traffic congestion, ground and drinking water contamination and loss of productive farmland.

Sprawling development can harm rural communities and valuable natural resources. Recent stories about the devastating fires in Oregon and other Western states spotlight what happens when an increasing number of people live in fire zones. These new forest residents expect an urban level of fire protection but their presence precludes forest managers from allowing natural, healthy burns. This restrictive policy allows forest debris to build up, threatening our rural communities and forests with more frequent—and severe—fires.

There'll always be competing land uses: residential, industrial, agricultural, recreational, resource, wilderness and commercial. The question is how to best balance these uses for the public good.

Unfortunately, Charles doesn't seem interested in providing answers or solutions to this question. He simply urges us to throw out what's helped us successfully deal with explosive growth.

He has suggested in the past that the Portland region abandon our award-winning light rail system at precisely the time several other sprawling regions—Houston, Atlanta, and Phoenix, Ariz.,—are investing in new or expanded rail transit systems to manage and direct their growth.

I agree that some libertarian approaches such as price signals deserve further exploration to encourage people to do the right thing. People who use studded snow tires, for example, should pay for the privilege of tearing up our roads. Mileage-based auto insurance and vehicle registration fees would help to equalize the price drivers pay for using our highways.

But the notion of applying pricing mechanisms on a large scale so drivers pay to use all bridges, highways and even local streets has been greeted with great public skepticism. In fact, voters routinely reject candidates who have advanced a Libertarian platform; the public is simply not willing to eliminate taxes, most drug laws, many public services, and pollution

regulations in favor of letting the market take control of our future.

No, the answer is not to abandon our tradition of thoughtful policies, which seek to manage land uses and restrict wasteful, sprawling patterns of development. The answer is this: continue Oregonians' pioneering work in creating better rural and urban communities, balancing competing land-use demands with practical realities and political opportunities, continually searching for ways to reduce bureaucracy and inequalities.

Far from abandoning Oregon's innovative approaches to land-use and transportation planning, we must strengthen our commitment to provide better and more cost-effective residential and transportation choices. We must involve more people to help us craft thoughtful environmental protections, wise infrastructure investments and regulations requiring individuals be responsible for their activities.

Abandoning our land-use program now will not make Oregon more livable. It would accelerate our return to the failed laissez-faire approaches discredited around the nation, overload our environment and erode our quality of life.

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